Barking up the Right Tree
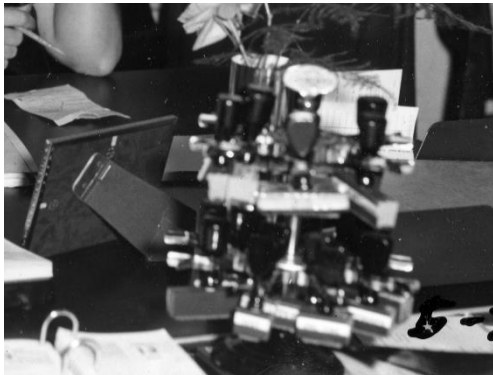
TRIVIA CHALLENGE: What was (or is) a stamp tree?

TRIVIA ANSWER: Back in the day, before computers could automatically put headers and footers on documents, often the classification of documents had to be emplaced manually. Documents that were released in mass quantities would usually have the classification printed at the top and bottom of each page, so that presented no problem. However, documents distributed in smaller numbers had to be marked individually.

One common way to mark the documents was with rubber stamps. These were, as the name indicates, small blocks of rubber, attached to a wooden or plastic handle, that had common classification terminology carved into the rubber — SECRET, TOP SECRET, and the like. The office issuing the document would first press the rubber stamp onto an ink pad, then apply it to the appropriate places on the paper.

The number of stamps needed quickly mounted up. In addition to the classification level, the issuing office needed a stamp to indicate that the document contained SIGINT. Stamps also were needed to indicate any caveats,

compartments, or special releasability instructions. The contents of the stamp were written on a piece of paper pasted to the side of the wooden block that held the rubber in place, so the stamper would know which to use.

In some cases, an office might have to stamp the document's date on the paper. Special stamps, rigged with wheels and a rotating stream of numbers molded into the rubber, allowed the user to change the month, day, and year on the stamp at appropriate intervals.

Given that each of these categories had several options, offices needed to take steps to organize the stamps efficiently. Offices that used a significant numbers of stamps would have a metal device with a number of clamps, fastened so they would rotate, that could hold a stamp firm around the handle in a way that the wording on the wooden part of the stamp was visible. This item was commonly called a "stamp tree."

Some offices might have to stamp a fairly large stack of paper. Experienced personnel would coordinate the process of stamping from ink pad to paper top to ink pad to paper bottom, move the paper to the "finished" stack, and start the process all over again — and work up a good deal of speed in making their way through the stack. This sometimes was derisively known as "NSA PT."

508 caption: A double-decked series of metal clamps holding rubber stamps that were described in the article text.